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SUBJECT: A/S LOWENKRON'S LUNCH WITH RELIGIOUS ANALYSTS

REF: A. BAKU 1700

[1](#)B. BAKU 01810

[1](#)C. BAKU 01367

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: At a December 19 lunch hosted by A/S Lowenkron and the Ambassador, independent religious analysts argued that several foreign Islamic ideas and practices -- specifically from Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia -- are influencing the traditionally tolerant variant of Islam within Azerbaijani society. The failure of the secular opposition has created a political and ideological void, which proponents of political Islam seek to fill. While foreign Islamic influences are growing, one commentator said that it would be "very difficult to sell a theocratic political model" to Azerbaijani society. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) In honor of visiting Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Barry Lowenkron, the Ambassador hosted a December 19 lunch discussion with four local religious analysts. The following Azerbaijani commentators attended:

Dr. Nariman Gasimoglu, Azerbaijan Center for Religion and Democracy  
Dr. Arif Yunusov, Institute of Peace and Democracy  
Dr. Altay Geyushov, Professor of Turkic-speaking People and Caucasus History, Baku State University  
Dr. Naile Suleymanova, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences Institute of Manuscripts

[1](#)3. (C) A/S Lowenkron and the Ambassador welcomed participants, saying they looked forward to hearing their views about religion in Azerbaijan. They each remarked that Azerbaijan can serve as a model of religious tolerance.

[1](#)4. (C) Gasimoglu agreed that Azerbaijan could serve as a positive model of moderate Islam. Since independence, however, new external Islamic trends are coming to Azerbaijan that could change Azerbaijan's traditional, moderate brand of Islam. Gasimoglu stated the "politicization of Islam is in progress in Azerbaijan." He pointed to fundamentalist threats that he had received regarding some of his public positions on Islam. He also said the GOAJ has failed to bring to justice Azerbaijanis who called for the death of a newspaper writer who wrote an article that some regarded as insulting Islam. (Note: Gasimoglu was referring to a November 2006 article by Azerbaijani author Rafiq Tagi in a local Azerbaijani newspaper, which questioned whether Islam impeded the development of modern society. In the wave of criticism against the article, some Azerbaijanis in the conservative city of Nardaran, as well as some Iranian clerics, issued death threats against Tagi. See ref A.) In

this context, Gasimoglu suggested that the USG should push the GOAJ to support moderate Muslims. He also observed that even some individuals in the secular opposition are using Islam for political purposes.

15. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question whether political Islam is growing, Yunusov said a distinction should be drawn between Islam as a religious phenomenon and Islam as a political tool. A natural process of religious awakening has been occurring in Azerbaijan for some time, Yunusov argued, although the use of political Islam is increasing. Yunusov said there are three categories of opposition to the current government: the secular, western-oriented opposition, Russian-oriented groups, and Islamic-inspired individuals. In the period before the 2003 Presidential elections and the 2005 Parliamentary elections, only the first group played a large role. Islam, however, is growing as a political ideology and an alternative to oppositionists who favor democracy and Western integration. Still, most of the Azerbaijani population favor a Turkish variant of Islam, not a Saudi or Wahhabi model.

16. (C) A/S Lowenkron asked how this change -- the possibility of political Islam filling the void left by the failure of the secular opposition -- had occurred. Yunusov said that whereas five years ago, human rights defenders went to the US Embassy for assistance, they increasingly go to the embassies of Norway, Germany, or the UK. He said that many Azerbaijanis perceive BP as another symbol of America and corruption, despite the fact that the company is British. Yunusov mentioned that the Iranian television station Seher Two (which broadcasts in Azerbaijani) is a key source of news for those living in southern Azerbaijan. To some extent, the television station plays a role similar to the one played by Radio Free Europe during the Soviet period. Yunusov argued

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that it is a dangerous situation when segments of the Azerbaijani population are turning to Iran for news about the outside world. Yunusov also observed that there is a similarity between the domestic political environment in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, in that political Islam is filling a vacuum left by weak, secular parties. Yunusov gave the example of mosques in Azerbaijan's regions serving as centers for political discussions in the absence of alternative sites for such discussions. (Note: Yunusov made many of the same points during a dinner with the Ambassador on December 6 -- reftel B.)

17. (C) Geyushov said Azerbaijan had been a model of moderate Islam before the Soviet period in part because there was a strong core of Westernizing intellectuals. A group of 2,000 - 3,000 western-educated Azerbaijani intellectuals were formative in fashioning a positive role for Islam in Azerbaijani society before the Soviet period began. After independence in 1991, there was an attempt to have a similar class of westernized intellectuals lead Azerbaijani society toward the West, while reserving a modernizing role for Islam. This attempt by the post-independence, secular, western opposition to mimic the intellectuals of the First Azerbaijani Democratic Republic has failed, according to Geyushov. The current opposition failed because they are not as well educated as their intellectual ancestors and they are not adept politicians. The modern opposition also failed to establish the former close link between religion and society that the pre-Soviet western intellectuals managed to do. Geyushov explained that most Azerbaijanis lost their knowledge of Islam during the Soviet period. Increasingly, Azerbaijan is resembling most other states in the Islamic world that are characterized by an authoritarian regime and a weak, secular opposition. In response to A/S Lowenkron's question, Geyushov clarified that he thought the secular opposition's ideas were "bankrupt." Despite this failure, Geyushov said that the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijani society prefers a Western, American-style form of society instead of an Iranian-style society.

18. (C) Geyushov continued, saying the growth of Islam is "very strong" among the new generation of Azerbaijanis. This growth is largely due to foreign missionary efforts -- especially from Iran, Wahhabis and the Turkish Nurcu sect. The growth of Islam -- under these foreign influences -- is occurring in the major urban centers and in the regions. It is also not just the stereotypical poor, uneducated individuals who are turning to Islam, but also the intelligent, affluent Russian-educated Azerbaijanis who are attracted to it because it is not corrupt, according to Geyushov. Increasingly, the opposition is considering how to incorporate Islam into its political platform. Despite these trends, Geyushov cautioned that it would be "very difficult to sell a theocratic political model" to Azerbaijani society. Instead, it is more likely that a "Turkish model" could gain traction within Azerbaijani society. Geyushov explained that by a "Turkish model," he meant the influences of the ruling Turkish Justice and Development Party and a focus on corruption as a central issue. Geyushov clarified that he was not referring to Kemal Attaturk's policy of forced modernization and secularization.

19. (C) In response to a question from A/S Lowenkron, Gasimoglu expressed concern that the GOAJ wanted to get rid of the secular democratic opposition, which he described as "a very dangerous step."

110. (C) Suleymanova said there was a "better relationship" between Islam and politics during the pre-Soviet period. The role of Islam diminished during the Soviet period, as religious courts were closed and Russian language schools opened. She noted that the number of mosques and madrassas dramatically declined during the Soviet period. Suleymanova clarified that this process occurred with all religions during the Soviet time, not just Islam. Azerbaijanis never lost their Islamic orientation despite the Soviet Union's anti-religious drive, said Suleymanova. After independence, Suleymanova said foreign education was a key means for transmitting foreign variants of Islam to Azerbaijan. Specifically, Azerbaijanis who studied in Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were inclined to bring these countries' respective Islamic models back to Azerbaijan. The ideas from Saudi Arabia are growing because the Wahhabis have a strong "propaganda approach," although their numbers are much smaller than students who studied in Iran and Turkey. These students who studied abroad generally like to discuss the role that Islam should play in politics. On several issues involving the role of Islam in politics, these three "camps" strongly disagree with one another. Suleymanova argued that

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Azerbaijanis educated within Azerbaijan tend not to be as divisive.

111. (C) Explaining why the Turkish brand of Islam was not as popular as the Saudi Arabian approach, Geyushov said the former's discourse primarily is focused on religion and not political issues. Yunusov said Nurcular is the key Turkish Islamic force in Azerbaijani society. He said that Nurculars are not presently active in politics, but are instead focused on increasing the future influence of Islam in society. Yunusov -- providing examples of Turkish Islamic influence in Azerbaijani society -- said Nurcu theology influences Kavkaz University in Baku and the Fetullah Gulen movement's Turkish television Samanyolu can be received via satellite in Baku. Yunusov commented that people in Azerbaijan's southern regions know who Sistani is and identify him as their religious leader. (Comment: The GOAJ has recently taken steps to remove Samanyolu. End Comment.)

Comment  
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112. (C) As we have reported in the past (reftel C), Azerbaijanis of all political persuasions agree that

religiosity is on the rise in Azerbaijan. The degree to which this growing interest in and observance of religion will translate into political Islam is an issue we continue to assess. The statements made by some of these analysts -- particularly Yusunov,s charge that political Islam will be the "only" alternative to a failed, secular opposition -- strike us as somewhat premature at this time. The only formal "political Islam" movements that currently exist in Azerbaijan are led by minor religious leader Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and the Islamist Party. Both movements are widely believed to be financed by Iran and, as such, do not enjoy wide popular support. Informal social and humanitarian efforts may be enjoying greater success; however, Azerbaijan is very much a society in transition and, as such, could be more open today to outside influences than it has been in the past if the GOAJ is not perceived as responding to the people,s needs -- a possibility of which the GOAJ is keenly aware. We continue to monitor this issue carefully and will report further.

13. (U) A/S Lowenkron cleared this message.  
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